

# COLOURFUL CONNECTIONS



#### Company Chairman

Richard Heath, the chairman who founded Prism as a subsidiary of ECC publications

**Prism is a company that has grown from its simple beginnings as a distributor of Sinclair products to become a major marketing force. Instrumental in the development of Micronet, the company now markets Sinclair, Oric and Wren computers and is currently moving into the fast-developing home robotics field.**

While most companies in the home computer industry are content to take a short-term view of the market by fulfilling immediate demand for hardware or software, Prism is looking to the future. A major hardware distributor, Prism played a leading role in the development of Micronet – the first large-scale database to be made available to home users – and is now involved in the distribution of low-cost robots.

The company was set up in 1982 by ECC Publications to develop Micronet, under the direction of Richard Heath and Bob Denton. Micronet uses Prestel, the largest public viewdata system in the country, to enable users of a wide range of home computers to download software, access information and exchange 'electronic mail' (see page 101). ECC Publications had already launched *Sinclair User* magazine, although at this time Sinclair products were available only by mail order or through the WH Smith retail chain. *Sinclair User* proved hugely successful, despite initial scepticism on the part of Terry Cartwright, now Prism's marketing director. 'I thought Sinclair was just a flash in the pan,' he admits, 'but we went to the first ZX Microfair with 8,000 subscription forms and there were queues of people right around the block and we handed out all the forms in just a few hours.'

Sinclair decided to move into the high street retail market, and Prism duly signed a contract to distribute the ZX81 and the newly launched

Spectrum. In fact, the company name was deliberately chosen to foster an association with the Spectrum in the public mind – after all, if you direct a beam of light through a prism you'll end up with a spectrum of colours! Prism recently claimed to have sold over 500,000 Sinclair machines – an estimated 25 per cent of all UK home computer sales to date.

March 1983 saw the launch of Micronet by Prism, in partnership with British Telecom and Telemap. Prism took care of the hardware, distributing a range of modems (manufactured by O E Ltd and Thorn EMI) for the more popular machines. The most recent addition to this range was a modem for use with the Commodore 64.

Micronet now has around 10,000 subscribers, but Prism has recently sold its share of the network and is now concentrating on marketing and distributing computer hardware. In addition to the Spectrum, Prism now handles the Oric and Atmos machines as well as its 'own-brand' portable business machine, the Wren. After production delays of several months, the Wren, which is manufactured by Thorn EMI, is now appearing in the shops at a price of around £1,000.

Prism is also moving into a new area – the distribution of home robots. Interest in this field is growing fast, and Prism now markets 'Topo', a £1,500 robot imported from the USA, as well as a number of cheap robot kits selling under the name 'Movits' at prices between £10 and £35.

Terry Cartwright sees robots as an area of great expansion. 'There is a tremendous interest in robots,' he says. 'I don't know what people will do with them, but in 1976 nobody knew what would happen with Apple computers, either.' The company also hopes to begin distribution in September this year of the Sinclair QL. Cartwright expects Prism's diversification to continue in the future. 'Overseas expansion is very much a priority in the next 12 months,' he says.

#### Subscription Bonus

The company plans to rent these modems to customers, together with a year's subscription to Prestel and Micronet



#### Early Bird

The Wren, Prism's portable Z80-based business machine, comes fitted with two disk drives and a built-in modem to connect it to Prestel

